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ABSTRACT

A new bill has been introduced in Congress by Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA) and Representative Dale Kildee (D-MI) that would make full-day early childhood education widely available to preschool students. The bill, labeled "Smart Start" (S. 2270) is intended to help economically disadvantaged preschool students, whose numbers have increased drastically over the last 8 years. A longitudinal study of the Perry Preschool Project in Michigan is cited as an example, among others, of the quantifiable long-term benefits of preschool programs for the later educational success of disadvantaged students. Early intervention has high potential as a cost-effective method for combatting high school dropout rates, and therefore decreasing associated problems such as youth unemployment, drugs, and crime. It also saves lower-income parents the burdensome expense of day care. A key feature of the "Smart Start" proposal is cooperation at the local level, since any organization capable of providing decent full-time care could deliver the services. A sidebar describes provisions in the bill for personnel, funding, eligibility, and parental involvement, along with potential opposition and program goals. (TE)

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Updating SCHOOL BOARD POLICIES

Volume 19/Number 8/September 1988

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Let's make a "Smart Start" on our future!

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We are faced with a unique opportunity to change the lives of millions of children who are at risk in our society. If we knew of a proven method to double the odds that our most disadvantaged children would become literate, have a job, or go on to higher education, wouldn't it make sense to give it a try? If we could save six dollars for every dollar we spend, shouldn't we make that investment?

The chance exists

Fortunately, such an opportunity exists. America has always known the value of education. Now we know that offering developmentally appropriate early childhood education is one of the best ways to insure a brighter future for our children and our country.

Representative Dale Kildee (D-MI) and I have introduced in Congress a bill that would make full-day early childhood education programs widely available to preschool students. We call this bill "Smart Start" (S. 2270), and I intend to make it my top education priority.

We cannot afford to let another generation of children suffer the consequences of their economic disadvantage. It is no secret that poverty among children has risen sharply during the 1980's. There are almost three million more poor children in 1988 than there were in 1979. Today, one in four children under the age of six lives in poverty.

Among minorities, the figures are even starker. More than a third of all Hispanic children and nearly half of all Black children are poor. For minorities in female-headed families, the numbers are overwhelming. More than two-thirds of all Black and Hispanic children living in such families are poor.

Life-long impact

The burden of poverty for these children is tragic, and their plight is worsening. Compared with eight years ago, children living in poverty are less likely to be born with adequate prenatal care, less likely to be immunized against disease, less likely to have access to basic health care, and less likely to receive extra educational services.

Nature never waits for social policy. One of the most distressing legacies of the past eight years is the children we might have helped. They are no longer children today and are often beyond reach of any help. The impressionable 5-year-old girl of 1980 has become the 13-year-old teenage mother of 1988, perpetuating a senseless cycle of dependency and despair.

Solution: early education

We now know that early education programs work—and work well—for children most at risk. Early intervention is both liberal and conservative. It saves lives that will otherwise be blighted. It saves billions of tax dollars. And it may even save an entire generation.

This is a view shared not just by educators and child advocates, but also by Fortune 500 business leaders with a hard-nosed eye for the bottom line. The Committee for Economic Development, an organization of top corporate executives, tells us, "It would be hard to imagine that society could find a higher yield for a dollar of investment than that found in preschool programs for its at-risk children."

For too long, we have ignored that advice. Despite the well-documented benefits of early education for disadvantaged children, it is the children of the wealthy who are most likely to be enrolled in early education programs. The challenge is to enhance access for children from low-income families to similar programs that are sound, supportive and cost effective.

Fortunately, we have many models and much evidence to back them up:

- In my own state of Massachusetts, the Brookline early education project found that children who had not attended preschool were twice as likely to exhibit inappropriate classroom behavior and to have difficulty reading than those who had.
- The state of South Carolina embarked on an extensive early childhood education program after finding that the first grade failure rate of low-income children without any preschool was almost three to four times higher than those who had been enrolled in a pilot program for 4-year-olds.
- Last fall, the U.S. Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee heard persuasive testimony from the Superintendent of the Philadelphia Public Schools. Philadelphia's school system operates four major preschool programs serving 6,000 children, many from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. every workday, 12 months a year. A study of Philadelphia's "Get Set" program found that at grade eleven, more than 98 percent of the children equalled or exceeded national mathematics norms and about 82 percent did that well in reading.

Michigan leadership

For quantifiable results, you cannot do better than the Perry Preschool Project in Michigan. For 20 years, the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation tracked a group of Black children from

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Senator Kennedy, Democrat from Massachusetts, has served in the U.S. Senate since 1962. In addition to his chairmanship of the Labor and Human Resources Committee, Kennedy's assignments include the Armed Services, Judiciary, and Joint Economic Committees.

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poor families. Half of them had participated in a half-day education program for one year at the Perry Preschool, where the classes were small and the teachers were good. The other half served as a control group.

The results are striking—and convincing. By the time the children reached the age of 19, the Perry Preschool students had made remarkable progress. They were twice as likely to go on to postsecondary education, twice as likely to be literate, and twice as likely to have a job. They were a third less likely to be school dropouts, half as likely to have had a teenage pregnancy, half as likely to be on welfare, and much less likely to have had a run-in with the law. In dollar terms, the study found that an investment of $4,800 per child saved $29,000 in later costs—or six dollars saved for every dollar spent.

A good investment for kids

The potential of early intervention is high, especially in combating one of America's worst scandals—the fact that 15 percent of students drop out of school. The rate is higher for Blacks than Caucasians, and still higher for Hispanics. The consequences are devastating for the individual—dropouts are less likely to be employed; when they do find work, it is in lower paying jobs. Society pays for dropouts, too, through lost tax revenues, increased welfare costs, and higher crime.

According to the Committee for Economic Development, each year's class of dropouts costs society $240 billion dollars in lost lifetime earnings and foregone taxes. And this does not include losses from educational disadvantages passed on to these children's children. Dropouts are a classic example of the sins of one generation being visited on the next. If a national early education program can cut the dropout rate by a third, it is an investment well worth making.

What school boards will have to consider:

DATA

- In the last 15 years the percentage of 3 to 4-year-olds participating in some type of preschool program—public, commercial, or non-profit—has doubled from 21 percent in 1970 to 40 percent today.
- According to July 1987 U.S. Department of Labor statistics, 65 percent of preschool-age children are cared for by one or both parents:
  54 percent are cared for by the mother;
  7 percent by both mother and father who arrange their working hours so that one of them provides child care;
  4 percent of mothers care for their own and other's children;
  11 percent are cared for relatives other than parents;
  11 percent attend day care centers;
  10 percent go to a family-based day care setting;
  3 percent have personal babysitters.

FACILITIES

- Public schools provide the convenient neighborhood location that can make universal access to early education a reality. With an in-place, ready to expand transportation (school buses) and administrative system, public schools are a logical location for preschool education.
- "The schools see themselves, and are seen by the public, as providing universal services to all social classes. They are not pathology oriented. They have a well-established position in the use of federal, state, and local tax dollars. They have buildings . . . and money for renovating or expanding facilities. They have access to state and federal funds to serve young children with special needs," says Gwen Morgan, writing in the *Early Childhood Newsletter*, June 1977.
- Although such programs may be welcome in districts with declining enrollments, rapid growth areas may feel the pinch of having inadequate classroom space. Converting existing facilities to the particular developmental and physical needs of the 4-year-old often will require building renovation and equipment purchases. Preschool children require custom-designed bathroom fixtures, drinking fountains, and other facilities that can be expensive.

And parents, too!

Early childhood education is a benefit for parents, too. Finding day care is an expensive and burdensome prospect. Often it is an exercise in futility. Many parents, especially single mothers, face a Hobson's choice between work and welfare—between taking a job and leaving children to fend for themselves, or foregoing the opportunity for work and relying on public assistance.

According to the Bureau of the Census, one out of four mothers not in the labor force would look for work if child care were available. The proportion is one out of three for families with income under $15,000, and one out of two for single mothers. With adequate child care, 1.5 million women not on welfare would be workers—and taxpayers.

An additional problem is that for families of modest means, the average child care bill of $2,500 a year can be a crushing burden. Even when families are affluent enough to pay top dollar, spaces are often unavailable. For large numbers of families, a quality early education program that doubles as day care could fill a vital need.

"Smart Start" combines these two essential features. It is educational, and it would operate full-day and for the full calendar year, in order to meet the child care needs of working parents.

School board role

A key feature of this proposal is cooperation at the local level. Clearly, no successful early education program can work without involving public schools. But each community's needs and resources are different. "Smart Start" accommodates this diversity by requiring local schools, day care providers, Head Start agencies, parents, and others concerned with the education of young children to work together to determine whether current programs should be

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expanded or new programs established.

Under this proposal, any organization capable of providing quality full-time care could deliver the services. Each early education center would offer health, nutrition, and other social services and would be required to develop ties to the public schools. Each center would also have to meet basic requirements characteristic of quality programs: a low child-teacher ratio; small group size; staff trained in early childhood development; a developmentally appropriate curriculum; and parental involvement.

All 4-year-olds would be eligible to attend, and 50 percent of the places would be reserved for low-income children who would attend at no charge. Other families would pay what they can afford, based on a sliding scale.

No state or locality would be required to participate. But to ensure real commitment by those that do, state or local dollars would be required on a matching basis. The federal contribution would start at $500 million in 1989, increase to $750 million in 1990, and level out at $1 billion in 1991.

By involving state, local, and family resources, a national program can be established that will be affordable in terms of the federal budget and achievable in terms of public policy. By targeting low-income children, society will reap the special benefits that early education programs offer. And by providing full-day services the program will serve the day care needs of children and working parents.

"Smart Start" has many facets. It is an education program, a day care program, a job program, a literacy program, a health care program, a hunger program, a dropout program, a teenage pregnancy program, and a crime program.

Most important, it can be a genuinely new American program that will be a significant American investment in a better American future. The potential returns are enormous. Time is being wasted—and even worse, children are being wasted.

I do not expect a national program of this magnitude to be enacted in 1988. But I do hope that it will become part of the debate this year, and that it will be enacted in 1989. Together, let's make a "Smart Start" on our future, by making a commitment to that future now. ■

PERSONNEL

- The decision on who will teach the 4-year-olds will affect program content and cost. Options include:
  Paraprofessionals with a high school diploma or associate college degree.
  Staff credentialed (through experience and/or formal training) in early childhood education. The Child Development Associate (CDA) credentialing program, sponsored by the Federal Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, assesses candidates by observing classroom skills instead of requiring completion of certain courses or degrees.
  Elementary school teachers at the beginning salary level. Professionals in the field say that specific training in early child development is a more important requirement for effective preschool teaching than having an elementary teaching certificate.
  Supplementary use of secondary pupils as part of service programs or child care courses. "Working with young children is an excellent service-learning experience for youth ages 10 to 14-years-old .... these youngsters seem to develop special relationships with 3- and 4-year-olds." (Joan Schine, "Learning Through Serving," *Principal*, May 1988)

FUNDING

- The costs of the program will depend on class size, type of teachers hired, and range of services provided. Annual costs per child range from a high of $5,700 (elementary school teacher/class size of six) to a low of $1,900 (minimum wage employee/class size of 20). A half-day program doubles the number of children that can be served compared with an equivalent full-day program, but operates on a schedule that does not fit the needs of many working parents.
- Traditionally, federal funding has provided the lion's share of money for preschool initiatives through the Head Start program and social service block grants to states—at a current annual cost of four billion dollars. The array of programs includes Head Start, child care services, educational programs for disadvantaged youth, and incentive grants for handicapped children. A child care tax credit also is available to all families, with the extent of the benefit based on income.
- To fund preschool education, states can expand their existing child care or Head Start programs by adding state revenues to federal funds; award grants to local school districts; offer tax credits or vouchers to parents; or increase the per pupil state educational aid distributed to local school districts.
- School districts can fund programs with local revenues, state monies, state or federal grants, business contributions, or parent fees (usually determined by a sliding scale based on family income level)—or use a mix of funding sources. The Hartford (CT) Public Schools recently joined forces with the Travelers Companies Foundation and the University of Hartford to form a "Hartford Early Learning Partnership." Working with a $500,000 endowment from Travelers, the coalition will focus on improving the quality of early education for at-risk youngsters.

ELIGIBILITY

- A broad-based eligibility criterion fits the need of working middle class parents for affordable child care and, at the same time proponents argue, helps the disadvantaged by increasing the interaction of at-risk children and parents with middle and upper income families.
- The debate continues on the long-term benefits to the disadvantaged of early interventions programs such as Head Start. Follow-up studies on Head Start children show "significant immediate gains in cognitive tests, socioeconomic test scores, and health status. In the long run, cognitive and socioemotional test scores of students do not remain superior to those of disadvantaged children who did not attend Head Start. However, a small subset of studies finds that former Head Starters maintain a better attitude towards school, are more likely to be promoted to the next grade, and are less likely to be assigned to special education classes. Head Start also has aided families by providing health, social, and educational services," concludes R.H. McKey et al., *The Impact of Head Start on Children, Families and Communities*.

- Edward Zigler, director of Yale University's Bush Center for Child Development and Social Policy, says that the publicized intervention programs succeeded with economically disadvantaged children "whose needs differ from those of the middle-class children who constitute the bulk of our school population. A large body of evidence indicates that there is little, if anything, to be gained by exposing middle-class children to preschool education . . . . We can make the most effective use of limited funds by investing them in intervention programs that target children in three overlapping groups: the economically disadvantaged, the handicapped, and the bilingual." ("Should Four-Year-Olds Be in School?" *Principal*, May 1986)
- However, Helen Featherstone ("Preschool: It Does Make a Difference," *Principal*, May 1986)) identified studies that demonstrate that "more affluent children benefit in much the same way as their poorer schoolmates. In the Carolina Abecedarian Project, middle-class 4-year-olds showed sizable gains in IQ . . . . When they reached second grade, they were less likely than controls to read below grade level or to show problems with competency skills."

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

- Actively involving parents in the school program is one of the most important and sometimes most difficult goals of preschool education. Several states, most notably Minnesota, have made parental involvement a capstone of their public school service. Twelve other states have initiated similar programs.
- Says Janice Colbert, *A National Perspective on Parent/Early Childhood Education Programs* (1977), "Research has shown that learning programs that focus on both the parent and the child tend to be more effective than those programs focusing exclusively or primarily on the child. The greatest gains were reported in programs that included home visits, the education of parents, and a high degree of parental teaching activities."
- Placing preschool programs in the public schools has drawbacks in terms of parent participation, notes Morgan. "Schools tend to center on the child out of the context of his or her family. . . . What we need to do is to make a variety of options available to parents and provide them with information about the choices," she says.

POTENTIAL OPPOSITION

- **Private Child Care groups.** Private care providers may lobby heavily against the use of the public schools because they fear that the program will ultimately force them from the market by providing a less expensive, more convenient service. They argue that the private sector can offer better services to fit the needs of a diverse clientele. A voucher or expanded tax credit system to implement preschool education is preferred.
- **Other Sources.** Bonnie Hausman and Heather Weiss ("State-Sponsored Family Education: The Case for School-Based Services," *Community Education Journal*, Jan. 1988) identify potential opposition from classroom teachers who may "resent intrusion on their physical space and may also feel threatened by the popularity of a new program." Some school administrators may oppose the expansion of their responsibilities and the traditional K-12 school mission.

PROGRAM GOALS

- Among current preschool programs, 63 percent stress both academic and social readiness; 22 percent academics; and 8 percent developmental needs. Academic curricula are teacher directed and skills oriented while developmental programs are child centered with the teacher expected to adapt to the social, emotional, physical, and learning needs of individual children.
- To implement successful preschool education, schools must "respect the all-important difference between early childhood education and formal education," writes Carolyn R. Pool, associate editor of *Principal* (May 1986). Activities should be based on the needs of individual children rather than on a prescribed curriculum or set of learning goals. To do otherwise may in the short term produce early reading, but in the long run a "hurried child" who will experience stress and adjustment problems, adds David Elkind, author and president of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, ("In Defense of Early Childhood Education," *Principal*, May 1986).

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Policies may be distributed to persons who do not have a binder. For example, policies can be reprinted or excerpted in school district newsletters to parents. Local schools may also send policy updates or summaries along with other material forwarded to parents. An issue involving a school policy may be aired on radio and television broadcasts; hence, include the broadcast media on your mailing list as well.

Despite its expense and use of staff time, sending policies and binders to a large number of individuals and groups expands school visibility—and in the long run strengthens public support for policy. Education will benefit as community trust and awareness increase.

Biscuit circuit

School district personnel should be available as speakers for community and parent organization meetings. Anytime educators go before an audience to explain policies, clarify misconceptions, and answer questions, there is opportunity to discuss the policy process.

Whenever possible, school board members should cite policy by title and number. This should be a staple of employee newsletters, informational publications, and administrative announcements. Have the appropriate staff check the content of publications for consistency with approved policy. Regular publication features (e.g., personnel notices) should carry appropriate policy citations.

A necessary evil?

Some describe school board policy as a "necessary evil." Whether or not a specific **policy** is strong or weak, the policy **process** is the fundamental building block for local citizen control of education. Policy is the vehicle for supervision and administration.

Some argue that policy should be limited to brief statements; others advise a broader scope which includes background and procedures. Consensus on the policy style best suited to the needs of your school district often emerges from a process of trial and error where policy effectiveness is monitored closely.

Policy administrators and school board members must call on their "creative juices" to find ways to reach the public. If support of public education is to continue and grow, the public must understand the goals, rules, and appropriate avenues for involvement in the decision-making process. Appreciating the policy process is key to that support. ■